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# Language contact across the North Atlantic

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# Scandinavian-American place-names as viewed from the Old World

*Arne Kruse*

## Introduction

Between 2.5 and 3 million Scandinavians (the term 'Scandinavian' here includes the five Nordic countries) emigrated to North America between 1830 and 1930: 1,100,000 Swedes, 800,000 Norwegians, 370,000 Danes, 300,000 Finns, 12,000 Icelanders. The Swedish trading post and colony, which existed in Delaware from 1638 to 1655, left some place-names which are still in use, and the Swedish language continued to be used into the early 19th century. But the real thrust of Scandinavian settlement in America came with the opening of the West. From the 1830s onwards Norwegians spread from Illinois north into Wisconsin, northern Iowa, Minnesota, and the Dakotas. The main Swedish immigration came in the late 1840s and 1850s with the settlement of Minnesota. Swedes also settled in Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. Mainly after 1860, Danes moved into Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. The Finns and Icelanders arrived last, mostly in the 1870s. The Finns either settled on marginal lands in northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, or went to the industrial centres as laborers. The first Icelandic settlement occurred in 1875 in Manitoba and in Winnipeg, from where they spread into North Dakota.

It is this first wave of settlement which is the most interesting from an onomastic point of view. During this period, when they settled on the free land, the Scandinavians established communities where they were influential enough to mark their presence sometimes with a Scandinavian-American place-name.

From the 1890s, most of the immigrants settled in towns, in New York, Chicago and Minneapolis, and finally, as the West opened up, in San Francisco and Seattle. In these urban surroundings, the immigrants only rarely left toponyms of a Scandinavian character.

## 1. Typology of place-names

The main concern in this article is the typology of place-names, but I will also comment on other aspects of the Scandinavian-American name material, drawing comparisons with names in Scandinavia.

The examples of names are taken from the place-name dictionary by Stewart (1970), the chapter on names in Haugen (1953), the book on Swedish-American names by Landelius (1985), articles by Berger (1938) and Hedblom (1966), my study of a local community in Coon Valley, Wisconsin (Kruse 1991), and also from my own sampling of names from American maps and along high-ways.

I will now present a typological classification of the Scandinavian-American names.

### 1.1 Transplanted names

Bringing ready-made names from the homeland to the colonies seems to be as old as emigration itself. Thus the Angles, the Saxons, the Danes, the Norse and the Normans all transplanted names from their homelands when they settled in the British Isles. This type of nostalgic or commemorative naming seems to increase as we come closer to our own time, probably due to an increase in the importance attached to national or ethnic identity. By the time of the great Scandinavian exodus in the late 19th century we can see how the influence of the national romantic movement and schools added new potential names of this type, both for transplanted and transferred names.

Examples of transplanted Scandinavian-American names are: *Stockholm* (e.g. Maine, S. Dak.), *Oslo* (Min.), *Smolan* (Kans.), *Erdahl* (Min.) *Malmö* (Min. and Nebr.), named after the Swedish city Malmö (*Malmö* in Alta, Canada is a secondary borrowing from *Malmö* in Nebraska).

The transplanted name will typically be the name of the region, town or village from whence the immigrants originated e.g. *Sogn* (Min.); or it will have iconographic implications of historical or national importance to the respective country of origin: *Eidsvold* (Min.), *Upsala* (Flor., Min. and Ont.), *Vasa* (Min.).

Most transplanted names for smaller Scandinavian-American settlements will have been coined by the immigrants themselves in order to establish links to their old roots. Berger (1938) reminds us that this is not always the case. *Mora* (Min.) got its name when an American mail distributor wanted to honour the workers from Mora in Sweden, who worked on the new railroad. He saw to it that a town on the line was named after their home town.

When the Finnish name for Finland, *Suomi*, and a Swedish poetic name for Sweden, *Svea*, are used, we can be sure that these are settlements which were named by the immigrants themselves. However, common names like *Denmark*, *Norseville*, *Swede Creek*, *Scandinavia*, and sometimes names like *Stockholm* and *Gothenburg*, will very often have been given by American administrators and cartographers in order to identify Scandinavian settlements. *Svenoda Lake* (Min.) was created by taking *Swe+no+da* from Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, since the area was settled by people from all three nations and the administration needed a characterising name. Such names are no more Scandinavian than *Finnmark* and *Lappland*, in northern Scandinavia, are Sami names.

*New Sweden* (Maine) and *New Denmark* (New Brunswick) were both results of the US and the Canadian governments' policy of actively recruiting Scandinavian settlers in the early 1870s. In honour of their Canadian agent, Captain Heller, the Danish colonists initially called their new home *Hellerup*, which in Denmark is a town just north of Copenhagen. Not long after their arrival, their enthusiasm for Captain Heller chilled, because they felt he had misled them with his promises and the official name became *New Denmark* (Bojesen 1992).

Two names from the Norwegian-American community of Coon Valley, Wisconsin may illustrate the fact that although many of the administrative names and names of villages may seem very Scandinavian, their history often reveals a degree of influence from the American or Canadian administrations. See Map 1.

The first two townships in the very Norwegian-American community of Coon Valley were given the names *Bergen* and *Christiana*. When the authorities demanded that the administration of the first township in Coon Valley be organised, the locals had to elect someone to be in charge and to see to it that the settlement got a name. The overwhelming majority of Norwegians really had no other choice but to elect one of the few local Yankees, who was able to read and write English. The successful candidate was the one who promised the Norwegians that the township would get a Norwegian name. The talented politician kept his promise and chose the name *Bergen*, which was Norwegian and easy to pronounce, in spite of the fact that none of the local Norwegians actually came from anywhere close to Bergen. The idea was that the next township would be named after the Norwegian capital, then *Christiania*, but the Yankee clerk missed out the last *i* in the name, so it became *Christiana* – probably in analogy with several other places in the Midwest and on the East Coast (Del., Penn.) called *Christiana*. For a map showing the exact geographical position of Coon Valley in Wisconsin, see Map 2 in Hjelde (in this volume).

### 1.2 Transferred names

Transferred place-names are names of persons, ideas or mythical places which are adopted as place-names. Such names may have strong national or ethnic implications for the settlers or may be 'respectful' names taken from the Bible or classical mythology. This became a productive American naming pattern with names like *Eden*, *Galilee*, *Homer* or *Bismarck* now spread all over the continent. Personal names from American history were also widely used: *Washington*, *Jackson*, *De Soto*.

The many Scandinavian-American transferred names for places like *Gimli* (Man.), *Viking* (Alb.), *St. Olaf* (Iowa) are original American creations declaring a romantic link to the ethnic past in the Old World. When *Thor* and *St. Olaf* are used as place-names in America they are products of education and the national romantic influence.

A parallel re-use of the names of figures and beings from Norse mythology and national tradition was popular in Scandinavia towards the end of the 19th century – on villas (e.g. *Breidablikk*, *Gimle*) and young people's society houses, 'ungdomshus' (e.g. *Valhall*, *Lidsjålv*, *Mjølner*). So we may regard the Scandinavian-American naming pattern as a continuation of a contemporary Scandinavian fashion. There has recently been a renaissance for this naming pattern in the unlikely area of the oil industry. In the names of oil-fields in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea we find transferred names from Norwegian fairy-tales e.g. *Troll*, *Smørbukk* and *Veslefrikk* and also from Norse mythology e.g. *Sleipner*, *Heidrun*, *Odin* and *Valhall* – the latter two were also used as settlement names in the Midwest.

*Jenny Lind* (Ark.), named after the immensely popular Swedish singer, is unusual because both her names are used in the place-name.

As Scandinavians sometimes adopted family names which originally denoted a farm or croft or region, we cannot take it for granted that all American place-names which carry Scandinavian toponyms are transplanted names. Some will have been transferred, because they are

named after a person whose family name was originally a toponym. *Westby* (Wis.) is an example of this type, and so is *Hallandale* (Flor.), named after the Rev. B. N. Halland, who took his family name from the region in Sweden where he was born.

Onomastically the transplanted and transferred names offer good examples of the fact that place-names need not have an origin in semantically transparent appellatives. Scandinavian names, like *Valdres* or *Mora*, may be semantically opaque on the lexical level by the time they are re-used to name new settlements or natural features. We may also observe how the onomastic function of lexically meaningful words like *Lund* 'grove' or *Eidsvoll* 'isthmus' + 'meadow', makes their semantic content superfluous or irrelevant. In America these names will be found far from any forest or waterway. The Swedish settlers who decided to recycle the name *Stockholm* were not concerned by the fact that the new settlement was not located on an island.

### 1.3 Neologisms and hybrids

The Scandinavian origin of many American place-names may be hidden as a result of a brutal transition through American English. Sometimes the current official name is the result of shortening, like *Akra* (N.Dak.), from the Icelandic town Akranes, or it is the result of distortion – or assimilation, seen from the point of view of American English. Just from reading the map it is not obvious that *Galva* (Ill.) has its origin in Swedish Gävle (*Galva* (Iowa) is a secondary borrowing from *Galva* in Illinois) (Landelius 1985). The special Scandinavian characters *ä*, *æ*, *ö*, *å*, *ä* will always have been replaced.

Sometimes folk-etymology or other kinds of creativity may have also "improved" the original name. Settlers from *Folldalen* in Norway ended up in what is now *Fall Coulee* (Wis.). The reasons were that the English-American pronunciation of *Foll-* (from the river-name Folda, 'wide') was close to American *fall* 'autumn' and the meaning of *-dal* 'dale, valley' was carried on in the Midwestern (originally French) *coulee* 'valley with steep sides'.

There are examples of creative naming done by the settlers themselves: *Gotaholm* (Min.), originally *Götaholm*, coined from the Göta area in Sweden, where most of the settlers came from, and the Swedish missionary Holm who worked among the Indians in the 17th century. *Hellerup*, discussed above, is of the same type.

*Oklee* (Min.) is named after Ole K. Lee, on whose farm the village was founded. The pronunciation and the spelling of the name both show English-American influence.

Hybrids with a Scandinavian element are common. Usually the first element is a place-name or a personal name, and the second element is an English-American generic: *Jockmock Lake* (Min.), *Lundquist Lake* (Min.), *Palmville* (Min.), *Olsonville* (S. Dak.), *Swea City* (Iowa).

## 2. Low density of Scandinavian place-names

The density of place-names in North America is low by European standards. George R. Stewart (1970: [IX]) estimates that there are approximately 3,500,000 named places in the USA. This works out at about one name to the square mile. There are probably another million obsolete names, i.e. names that are recorded, but are no longer in use. In Norway alone, there may be 5,000,000 names in use (Olsen 1934) – which is approximately 20 names to the square mile.

Furthermore, compared to the Scandinavian contribution to the population of North America, there is a striking under-representation of Scandinavian-American names among the American place-names. Even in areas where the Scandinavian settlers used to be in a majority, we find relatively few Scandinavian-American place-names. Of more than 1,500 names that Cassidy (1947) investigated in Dane county, Wis., only eleven are of Norwegian origin, and this is an area where Norwegian settlement was exceptionally dense.

The conclusions of the research that has been done on Scandinavian place-names in North America (Berger 1938, Haugen 1953, Hedblom 1966, Landelius 1985, Kruse 1991) seem unanimous in this respect: there are relatively few Scandinavian-American place-names, and certain types or groups of names which are very frequent in Scandinavia are under-represented or seem to be totally non-existent.

I think there are two main reasons for the lack of place-names indicative of Scandinavian settlements in America. The first is found in the social structure of the settlements: in many cases the settlers were excluded or excluded themselves from taking part in the official administration. Wherever Scandinavians settled the settlers did not immediately take part in official affairs, and this must be a principal reason for the lack of Scandinavian place-names on American maps. The names on the maps are official, administrative names that often existed prior to the arrival of the Scandinavians, or they are settlement names created by the English speaking American administration in order to register new settlements.

In their first period in the new country, the Scandinavians were naturally excluded from official life because of language difficulties, but they must also have felt that the American administrative system was alien to them. The settlers felt that it had very little to do with them, as they had their own social network organised around their religious traditions and community customs from Scandinavia.

A sort of dualism must have emerged early amongst the Scandinavian communities in the rural areas. While the official administration looked outwards and represented the communities in the English language, the Scandinavian languages survived *underneath* the official English-American façade. It is here, in the local rural communities, that we find Scandinavian-American place-names – both for smaller places and for natural features – still in use today. (See Kruse 1991.)

A second principal reason for the scarcity of names is the perhaps obvious fact that names only exist if there is a need for them to exist. When there are fewer toponyms in North America than there are in the Old World, this mirrors the fact that these are two different societies

with different needs for names. We will focus on this relationship between society and names in the following sections.

### 3. Lack of variation in place-names

In general, there seems to be relatively less variation in the nomenclature in colonised areas than in the motherlands. This is documented by W.F.H. Nicolaisen (1989, 1991) on the Orkney islands of Sanday and North Ronaldsay where, for example, he finds that in the Norse name material there are very few terms for man-made aspects of a farmstead and so fine nuances of meaning cannot be expressed. Likewise, the generic terms used for natural features, both inland and on the coast, are relatively few and rather predictable. He concludes (1989: 80):

apart from some variation in the choice of terms for small hills, this is an unexciting landscape described in unexcited terms [...] What is discerned and toponymically structured here, one has seen at home before; it therefore asks for imitation, not innovation

H. Kuhn (1966) gives another example from the Old World: In the western regions of Norway there were at least three appellatives meaning 'small stream' (*læk*, *gróf*, *bekkr*) that the settlers who went to Iceland could have taken with them and used for naming in the new land. In *Landnámabók* there are 35 examples of names including *læk*, while there is only one name with *bekkr* (*Kvítubekkr*) and no names with *gróf*. (See also Bandle 1977.)

Nicolaisen stresses the close resemblance of the landscapes of Western Norway and The Western and Northern Isles of Scotland as a reason for the predictable use of generic terms and the lack of innovation in this colony. It is certainly an important point to consider whether the landscape the settlers arrived in was suitable for applying the precise meaning of the appellatives they would have known from their homeland. As many of the Scandinavian immigrants to America settled in the Midwest which is mostly prairie or at least relatively flat, we will not of course find a varied use of toponyms denoting hills and valleys. Most farms are shaped as squares or rectangles, with the houses placed in the middle of vast fields of monoculture. In a landscape like this, where there is a lack of characteristic features, there is hardly any need to stick detailed geographical labels on the topography (Haugen 1953: 219). However, it is somewhat surprising to discover the remarkable lack of variation amongst the generic terms in the rather rugged landscape of Coon Valley with a topography that can be compared to the central east Norwegian regions where the settlers of Coon Valley came from (Kruse 1991). However, a landscape is never exactly the same from one region or area to the other, and this fact may at least partially explain why immigrants did not make use of the whole range of specialised appellatives they could in theory have brought from their home country, and also why they sometimes borrowed new appellatives or give old appellatives from home new and specialised meanings. For example, the settlers in Iceland gave *hraun* 'stone' the new meaning 'fields of lava' – a natural feature new to them; and the Norse in Caithness and the Northern

and Western Isles of Scotland used the Old Norse *gjá*, now *geo*, to name the many distinct narrow inlets in a type of coastal landscape which was new to the Norse settlers.

Though the landscape of Coon Valley is varied, with valleys and steep hillsides, it is still not the type of geomorphology one finds in the ice-carved Norwegian valleys. Coon Valley is part of the so-called driftless region, which is characterised by a plateau with valleys and ravines with steep sandstone hillsides carved by water, and not by glaciers as in Norway.

The settlers of Coon Valley clearly found that they could not make use of the numerous specialised terms for heights that they brought with them from Norway. We do not find any *fjell*, *ha*, *ås*, *kolle* and so on in Coon Valley. Only two terms are frequently used as generic denoting heights; *rygg*, which is supported by its semantic and phonological closeness to the very common English-American *ridge*, in e.g. *Tyskerryggen*, *Rongstadryggen*, *Sorryggen*; and *blåff*, borrowed from American English *bluff* 'steep sandstone hill', in e.g. *Tilliblåffa*, *Knipstillblåffa*.

We find one example of *haug*, a generic term which is very common in Norway, in *Indiahaugen*, the name given to one of the few distinct smaller hills of Coon Valley, which would have corresponded to the meaning of *haug* in Norway.<sup>1</sup>

Only two other generic terms are used in the toponyms of Coon Valley: the Norwegian *dal*, m, which is possibly supported by its similarity to the English *dale* in e.g. *Springdalen*, *Bergedalen*, and the Norwegian-American *krikk*, m, which was borrowed from American English *creek* 'brook, small river' in e.g. *Rullandskrikken*, *Springdalskrikken*. See Map 1.

In Coon Valley the specifics are likewise few in number and show very little variation. The usual pattern is as follows: A surname or family name, which indicates a centrally located farm, constitutes the specific element of a name for both a valley, e.g. *dal*, and for the neighbouring ridge e.g. *rygg*, *blåff* or *krikk*: *Rullandsdalen*, *Rullandskrikken*, *Tilliblåffa*, *Lindvigryggen*.

Less frequently, specifics may indicate the ethnic groups that live(d) there: *Bohemidalen*, *Tyskerryggen*, *Indiahaugen* or orientation: *Sorryggen*, *Nordryggen*. There are very few other specifics: *Punkiryggen*, *Musdalen*, *Skogdalen*, *Springdalen*.

In conclusion, the relative lack of variation and innovation in the nomenclature of colonised areas may be explained by taking into consideration three distinct factors which affect the naming process:

**Philology:** Which appellatives are productive or in fashion at the time the emigration takes place?

**Topography:** What is the character of the new landscape compared to the one the settlers have left behind, and to what extent does the possible range of appellatives in current use fit the new landscape?

**Culture:** What type of contact is there with other cultures in the settlements? The examples above illustrate three different types: Iceland: virgin land, no other culture; Orkney: an established old culture (the Pictish) which seems to have had very little, if any linguistic influence on the naming process of the Norse settlers; Coon Valley: a dominant culture (the English-

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Arnstein Hjelde, University of Trondheim, for telling me about this name.

American) which has influenced the naming process of the Scandinavian immigrants very much through various types of analogy.

#### 4. The instability of names

In the following section I would like to examine the aspect of cultural contact in the naming process. It is important to stress the fact that the evidence of interference which we can observe in the Scandinavian-American system of denotation and naming is not only a product of linguistic interference in a narrow sense. The extra-linguistic interference will often explain why elements in the naming patterns are different. The relatively high degree of instability in the names of farms and farming vocabulary will illustrate the importance of a broader cultural approach to the topic rather than a narrowly linguistic one.

##### 4.1 Field-names

The relative absence of names in the cultural landscape compared to Scandinavia has already been remarked on. The field-names within a Scandinavian-American farm are also remarkably different from their Scandinavian counterparts. Fields within a Scandinavian-American farm are named by analogy with the pattern elsewhere in North America, i.e. they are identified according to what is cultivated on the field at any given season. As long as potatoes are grown in a field of a American-Norwegian farm, the field will be known as *potetfelt*; if tobacco is grown there the next season, it will be referred to as *tobakksfelt* (*fil*, *f*, is a American-Norwegian borrowing from American-English *field*).

The reason for the lack of permanent names for fields is to be found in the method of farming which in the early period of the settlements used to be very different to the Scandinavian. We should not forget that, with the introduction of new methods of farming to modern Scandinavia, we are now in the process of losing most of our old field-names. In the Midwest, large fields and monoculture have been the reality from the start. In addition, the more consistent practice of crop rotation in the Midwest prevents the establishment of permanent names linked to what is grown in the field.

##### 4.2 Farm-names

In North America farm-names are not permanent in the sense that Scandinavian farm-names are. An American farm is referred to by the family name of the present owner or occupier of the farm – a parallel practice to the ad hoc reference to the fields of the farm. If the family Strand lives on a farm, American-Norwegians will refer to the farm as *Strand*, *Strandfarmen* or

*Strandblassen*. If it is taken over by the family Olson, it will very soon be called *Olson*, *Olsonfarmen* or *Olsonblassen*.

Personal names are frequently found as elements in farm-names in Scandinavia, both Christian names and – less usually – surnames. The main difference from the American system is that while Scandinavian farm-names are what we will call permanent, the American farm-names are references to the current occupier and are subject to change when the occupier moves away.

The Scandinavian settlers must have adopted this naming system fairly early on, and the reason for this is likely to be found in the new way of farming that the settlers adopted in their new homeland. An American farm is economically and culturally different from its Scandinavian counterpart in the sense that it is regarded more as a source of income for the family here and now than as a family seat for generations. To many Scandinavian immigrants it was a shock to experience the business-like, if not cynical attitude to the land in the Midwest, but they were forced to adapt, and it was soon reported that Scandinavian settlers were as hungry for new land as all the others as the Frontier moved west (Gjerde 1985: 137). It became very usual for the immigrants to settle for a year or two in one place and then move on when rumours told them about better land further west.

In North America the farm name is first and foremost an address label that refers to the economic ownership of the land, while in Scandinavia the farm name has a historic aspect in addition to the obvious address function. In a young society with extensive internal migration and a market oriented structure it is inevitable that the historic aspect of names is not as important as in a more stable, traditional, agricultural society such as we have in the Old World.

##### 4.3 Names for natural features

There is in Coon Valley a remarkable lack of local names that are descriptive of the natural features, although there are names like *Stogdalen*/*Timber Cooley* and *Springdalen*/*Spring Valley*. As already mentioned, most of the valleys or coulees of Coon Valley are named after the farm at the entrance of the valley, and likewise, most of the ridges are named after the central farm situated on them. If the family living in one of these naming farms moves, and the name of the farm changes, it is very likely that the name of the valley or the ridge will also change. Many of the most central locations of Coon Valley have changed names as a result of this pattern. A map of Coon Valley, which was drawn in the late 1920s (Holand 1928: 13), may serve to illustrate this. Of the 23 American-Norwegian names of central valleys adjoining Coon Valley on this map, as many as 16 names have now disappeared or have been replaced by other names (Map 1).





family *Petterson* will move to another farm within the local community and thereby the denotation *Pettersonfarmen* is relocated within the same user group.

In a young cultural landscape like the American, prepositional phrases like *Attmed skulen* ('By the school'), *Oppi dalen* ('Up in the valley'), *Over krikken* ('Over the creek'), and names like *Krikken* and *Tobakksfila*, will provide many of the address tags needed. The social perspective, i.e. to bear in mind the user group of the term, is crucial when we consider whether these are to be classified as names or not. This type of term could be classified as "near-horizon names" (in Swedish *närhorisonnamn*), names which are used only within a limited community like the farm or the village. Within such a limited context they will normally be monoreferential and therefore can be classified as names.

Obviously, the place-names in the new colonies do not offer many challenges to the etymologist, because they are mostly clear and transparent. But onomastics ought to be based on more than etymology. Kurt Zilliakus stresses this when he claims that name research is a form of cultural research. He continues:

As cultural researchers it is not our task to analyse the names and the facts behind them as such, based upon a few general scientific points of view, but to regard the names as products of a certain culture; and from the point of view of the group of the population who embody the culture we should try to explain why the name givers have given the names and how they have chosen to do so (translation from Zilliakus 1975: 59).

Stefan Brink supports Zilliakus and says:

All names – not only settlement names, as some people might wrongly believe, and not only very old names, but also the very new ones – carry a unique potential of information, and it is my opinion that the place-name researcher's primary task is to try to clarify this through his name interpretation analysis, and then not only *explain* the name but also to try to *understand* the name in the context in which it was formed (translation from Brink 1992/93: 22).

With the farmland in the Scandinavian-American colonies not much more than a century old, we can observe how a system of naming is still taking shape and how new naming patterns develop from new demands in society. If the social or economic base of the society changes, we can observe how the place-names also change in response to the new demands.

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